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Honors College Thesis

“One in the Same”

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One in the Same

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Background Information on the Issue

In 2016 the world is more connected than it ever has been. Thanks to the internet, cellular telephones, and social media people all around the world can get glimpses into life in other countries and cultures at a moment's notice. This global connection can breed two distinct reactions. The first is inclusive. Some people will see the influx of different cultures, languages and lifestyles as an education about life across the globe. A second reaction to our globally connected world is less enthusiastic. Some people are more comfortable with the familiar and exposure to different cultures only serves to highlight how dissimilar people can be. This is our current dilemma: some people embrace different cultures and others prefer to focus on their own. This is a global trend. World leaders like Marine Le Pen, Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, and Donald Trump all advocate for a turn inward, less focus on globalization and a greater concern for one's own nation. While these sentiments themselves are not bad, they often go hand in hand with a distrust for those seen as "different." All around the world some groups of people are increasingly distrustful of those who seem different, from the heights of power to the streets some have rejected globalism and the free exchange of culture.

Sadly, there is a second trend coinciding with the global pushback on connection: terrorism. From the attacks on the World Trade Center to the Nice attacks, to the Brussels train bombings there have been thousands of civilian lives taken by terrorists claiming to represent Islam. The most prevalent form of this violent extremism currently comes from the Islamic State (IS). One study found that 56 people were arrested on terrorism related charges in 2015, the highest single year total since 9/11. 86% of those arrested were men, with an average age 26, and 51% had travelled or attempted to travel abroad. These people were not just sympathetic to the Islamic State, they were prepared to travel abroad and act on these feelings. One way that the

Islamic State effectively recruits soldiers and spreads their message is through social media. Unfortunately, they are quite prolific in this sense and they have developed a massive propaganda machine. A thirty day media audit found 1146 unique postings from IS sponsored accounts, for an average of 38 posting per day. These postings vary both in medium and in message. Post types include simple text or pictures to photo essays and documentary type videos. The postings prominently feature IS soldiers, but also a fair amount of content depicting the Islamic utopia they look to establish in their caliphate. The Islamic State's massive online presence is a problem for all who oppose violent extremism.

These terrorists do not represent Islam, but they have emerged on the world's stage as a perfect scapegoat. While many see 'different' as something to fear, Islamic terrorists have become the embodiment of these fears, especially in the United States. In the USA around 70% of the population is Christian and about 1% is Muslim. Globally Christians are still the largest with 31%, but Muslims are the second largest religious group with 23% of the world's population. For some Americans it is a logical connection to assume that the Islamic faith has connections to these terrorist attacks across the globe. This foolish thought pattern both plays into terrorist narratives of the Western world and inspires disaffected people to radicalize. This distrust of the Islamic faith means that the vast majority of Muslims are blamed for the actions of a few. The majority of Muslims, both in the United States and abroad, are peaceful and themselves want the terrorism to end. Unfortunately, some people cannot make this distinction. Some assume that all Muslims are to be distrusted, creating a world of paranoia, continued violence and fear of anything unfamiliar.

The Project Challenge:

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has been involved in efforts to combat violent extremism for several years now. DHS, in partnership with Edventure Partners (EVP), has created the Peer to Peer: Challenging Extremism (P2P) competition. This initiative encourages students and young citizens to get involved by promoting a positive counter narrative to those released by violent extremists. Student teams across the globe are invited to create social media campaigns designed to counter current extremist messages and “empower positive alternative narratives.” DHS acknowledges that extremist groups like the Islamic State are effective in recruiting soldiers through social media and use of the internet. This P2P challenge is designed to create conversations and interactions that run counter to the messages that IS spreads online. Specifically, student campaigns should aim for “awareness building, education, building cohesion and directly countering violent extremist narratives.” The ideal outcome for these campaigns is to engage the same young, angry people that IS preys on. With messages of positivity and inclusivity, student campaigns hope to save people from falling into traps of hatred planted by extremist groups.

Each student team is instructed to “advocate *for* something” rather than simply denounce hatred or directly blame extremist groups. This simple instruction plays into the positive message of the entire challenge; students need to promote something good not simply attack something bad. Specifically, topics like cultural and religious freedom, economic production, civic engagement and defector stories were given as starting points. EVP also provided student teams with case manager who provided guidance during the task. Examples of successful campaigns from the past include #DareToBeGrey. Submitted from Utrecht University in the Netherlands,

the campaign called for people to walk away a polarized world of black and white and instead acknowledge life is often shades of grey. Another campaign, It's Time from Rochester Institute of Technology, focused on interaction with Generation Y to encourage people to be the change they wish to see in the world. While all the teams were given the same directives each one came up with a distinct method of completing the challenge tasks.

Dr. Mason invited me to participate in the project with her team of MBA students. At the heart of the challenge was a communications campaign, much like any marketing initiative just with different message content. Before the specifics of the campaign were envisioned the team looked at who to target. EVP identified four potential groups for targeting: Uncommitted populations, silent majority, civic-minded individuals and at-risk youth. While social media and its participants are potentially global, we acknowledged that our campaign was rooted in Stillwater, Oklahoma. Our primary target was the silent majority, or those who oppose violent extremism but are not currently doing anything about it. We felt that in Oklahoma this was the largest population and thus the most likely to engage. Research shows that the majority of citizens opposes violent extremism and do not associate all Muslims with such behavior. Our challenge was turning those feelings into action. Our secondary target segment was any uncommitted people. Some people may not have formed an opinion about violent extremism. Research suggests this may be because they have not been exposed to the conversation. Our student team agreed that these were the next most accessible and realistic group to target given our geographic location and cultural situation. Targeting at-risk youth would be the best way to actually keep people from succumbing to violent extremist ideal. However these individuals are very difficult to identify and unlikely to be persuaded by a campaign with a positive message like ours.

The Campaign Content

There is a certain art to creating viral content. It has to be enticing enough to click on, entertaining enough to hold attention and it usually has to be short. Video is a fantastic and shareable medium that has blossomed with the advent of cameras in cell phones. Now anyone can be a videographer or photographer, and we wanted to play on that. My role on the team was to help with content creation. Ideally, people on social media would create content and utilize our hashtag, but we wanted to give them example to follow. With this in mind, we decided to create a series of videos to share on our Facebook and YouTube pages as well as conduct an on-campus event to encourage people to become engaged and interact with the campaign online. The group decided to call our campaign “One in the Same.” We wanted to highlight the fact that people around the world have many similarities, despite their differences. All people, regardless of race, gender, religion, nationality, income levels or education, have many things in common. We further refined our message not just to acknowledge these differences but celebrate them. We created the tagline, “Support Cultural Freedom. Share Your Story.” We believed that by sharing stories about our perceived differences users would be able to see that on the inside people are not very different. We developed a logo to embody the campaign theme and tagline One in the Same.



One in the Same

Our first step was recording interviews with people of the Muslim faith and with people of other cultural diversity on campus. We wanted to combat the many misconceptions about Muslims and show that they are people involved in activities like anyone else on campus. I helped record an interview with a Muslim American student from Stillwater. She wore a hijab and was selected because at first glance some people might be surprised to find out she was born in Utah, not the Middle East. Stereotypes are powerful and often take effect subconsciously. Hopefully our campaign highlights similarities and also addresses latent stereotypes. These preliminary interviews were designed to be quick, attention getting pieces of content for the social media pages. In total, we recorded five students on campus, which provided enough material to create multiple videos.

The next, and largest, stage of the campaign was our on-campus event. We had a station set up on the path between the Student Union and the Edmon Low Library to engage people on campus with our campaign. One in the Same signs adorned the tables and we had tee shirts and coffee tumblers for people willing to participate in our activities. The goal of the day was to increase engagement with the campaign, namely through promoting the Facebook page and gathering content to share on the page. We incentivized participation through giving out tee shirts and coffee tumblers with the One in the Same logo. We had whiteboards that said “What does ‘One in the Same’ mean to you?” and asked people to write their thoughts and then pose for a picture. Braver souls volunteered to record a video statement about what the phrase meant to them. In the course of five hours we interacted with over 300 people and engaged many in sharing their story in person and online. I recorded the video messages and took photos of people with their shared thoughts about what the phrase means during the event.

One important thing to note about the event was that it took place on November 9, the day after the 2016 President Election. It created a fascinating context for our event. Donald Trump advocated for a temporary ban on Muslims immigrating into the United States during his campaign, so naturally many Muslims saw his election as cause for alarm. As we stood with our One in the Same shirts on, we were often asked if we were trying to demonstrate for some political message or for support of Hillary Clinton. Holding the event on November 9 was both a positive and a negative. It undoubtedly turned some people away. After a long campaign, many people did not want to engage a topic even remotely controversial or political. However, for the people that did stop and talk to us, it was clear that our message of acceptance was just what they needed. As noted earlier, there has been a wave of isolationist sentiment sweeping the globe, including the election of Donald Trump. While our message was not intended to be political, many people we spoke to said that it was a political message that needed to be heard in our increasingly divided nation. Despite the context of the day, we still had great turnout and spoke with a many of fantastic people who shared messages of unity, equality and understanding. Please see the Appendix for photos taken during the event.

Part of my content creation job was editing the videos I recorded during the on-campus event. In total the team shot about 60 short video messages about what One in the Same means to people, so I had a lot of footage to pick through and cut up. The end product had to be short and engaging while it lasted. Watching a video online is like a purchase decision, if people see that watching will only 'cost' them 25 seconds of their time they are more likely to take that chance and watch it. With that in mind I tried to limit videos to about 30 seconds in length. I also wanted to include our One in the Same animation to the videos, after all these are just pieces to build on the larger campaign as a whole. With so many videos to work with I could be selective about the

content I used. In general, I wanted to have short clips from three or four interviews in each video. Short clips in a short video means there is a fair amount of cutting between subjects, which makes the viewer perceive that the time is going quicker compared to one long cut of a single subject. I was also cognizant of the tone of each speaker. I tried to have variety in each video, with some students delivering serious, heartfelt pleas and others with light, happy messages. In the end I was able to create twelve videos that can be used on the Facebook and YouTube pages.

As with any communications plan, there has to be measure of penetration and feedback. EVP outlines “awareness building, knowledge creation, attitudinal shift or behavior changes” as intended outcomes of the campaign. While these are abstract items to track, the use of surveys, social media metrics and audience responses are used as measures of engagement. Our campaign was limited to Facebook and YouTube. In the first week of the social media campaign we had 203 likes on our page and our videos have over two thousand views. We were utilizing the hashtag “#OneInTheSame” for our content, but it was not an accurate way of tracking campaign engagement. One in the Same is a fairly common figure of speech, so while it is immediately familiar it has also been used frequently by people not involved with our campaign. In short we cannot use that hashtag to accurately track any involvement with the campaign. The P2P challenge will run through the first week of December and the metrics will continue to be tracked.

Based on these results future recommendations can be made about improving the campaign. The most pressing issue for this campaign would be to expand to Twitter and other social media platforms. IS is very active on Twitter, and in order to counter their messaging

campaigns like ours need to be on the same platform. A second crucial recommendation would be to engage with so-called “amplifiers”. These are users on social media with large followings. These users are influential and reach more people with a single post than many accounts combined. If our campaign could engage with thought leaders like this, we would rapidly increase our level of engagement.

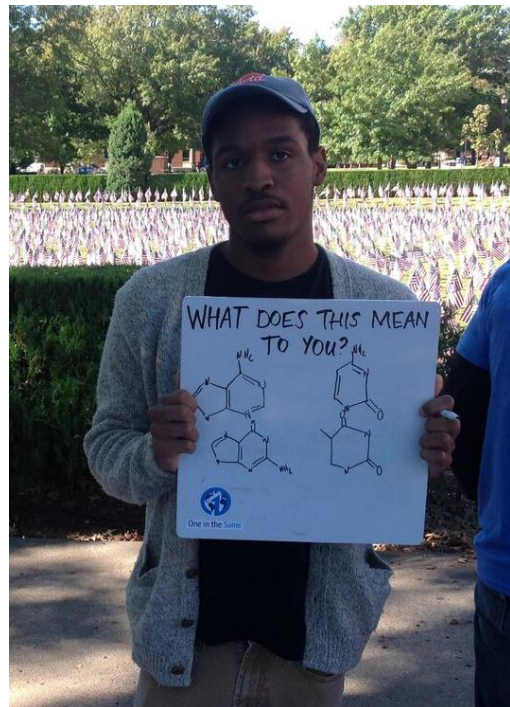
Conclusion:

Working on this campaign was quite the experience. Addressing such a massive and sensitive topic was daunting, but in the end I am happy with the message we delivered. DHS has practical reasons for attempting to dissuade people from engaging with extremists online, but this challenge also shows that even a problem as big as this can be dismantled if enough people work together to create a positive narrative. When I came to Oklahoma State from California I walked in with many stereotypes and misconceptions about how life would be here. During my time at Oklahoma State I have been pleasantly surprised to meet students from all over the world, with different cultures, backgrounds and beliefs. This campaign just continued to prove how eclectic the population of Oklahoma State and the country are. In February I am going to Zambia as a volunteer with the Peace Corps, and working on this campaign inspired me for my upcoming journey. Whether we are Cowboys, Oklahomans, Americans or simply humans, we have a lot in common and we accomplish more together. Before I left for college I did not think I could have much in common with students from India or Iowa or Cameroon, but now as I get ready to graduate it is clear to me that in the end we are all One in the Same.

Appendix:

Photos from the On Campus Event:





Screen captures from videos I shot and edited:





One in the Same

SUPPORT CULTURAL FREEDOM. SHARE YOUR STORY.

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